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ABSTRACT

While it is commonly assumed that teaching children is unrelated to teaching at the advanced level, the two kinds of teaching are closely related and mutually effective. The experience of teaching young learners can benefit the instruction of college students of English as a second language. In both cases, providing motivation is a challenge. Materials should be appealing, varied, authentic, challenging, and topic-oriented. Teaching children requires consistency and clarity of goals and requirements, and diversified tasks for a sense of achievement, as do adults. The games and role-playing activities involved in teaching children should also be used to teach adults. While children have a love of sound, older students need to be encouraged to enjoy it. Children's need to relax occasionally into their native language suggests that the same practice would be useful for adults. The teacher who has learned an essential element of teaching children, being available to them, has learned to be more relaxed with students. The needs for timing, recognition of individual developmental differences, and awareness of the learner's responses are similar for both age groups. (MSE)

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What can be learnt from teaching children?

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a strong belief that teaching children can have nothing to do with t aching at the advanced level. Moreover, teaching young learners has often been considered less prestigious professionally and socially. However, I find these two types of teaching closely related and mutually effective, and my aim is to show how the experience of teaching young learners cab benefit the work with university students of English.

Discussing common points I will refer to MOTIVATION, MATERIALS, VARIETY of tasks and activities, GAMES, appreciation of SOUND and the use of moth r tongue. Presenting immediate BENEFITS TO THE TEACHER I will mention increased awareness of students' needs and teachers' responsibilities.

When talking about children I will refer basically to 7-11 year olds, only occasionally to younger learners, and while speaking about adult learners I will always use the term "students" and will relate to the 1st year students of English at the Institute of English Studies of Warsaw University.

SIMILARITIES

While working with these two groups for many years I have gradually become aware of the "merging" effect. Oftentimes I have caught myself not only borrowing ideas, using the same materials, but also adopting a similar attitude and assuming similar responsibilities towards my students. I have found that all my learners are beginners in one sense or another: children, because they start learning the language, students, because they start studying it academically and embark on a life-long relation with it.

Analysing the beginnings of learning English I can also see considerable similarities. Children learn mainly because their parents want them to, and a little because of some fashion within peer groups - English, like tennis, swimming or other optional activities becomes a must at some age and in some environments. Similar social pressures and parental ambitions compel young people to enter universities, sometimes against their own wishes.

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MOTIVATION

Assuming that young children don't have ANY motivation to learn a foreign language, we can only hope to keep their interest by making our lessons worth attending. If we manage not just to teach them, but also to make them WANT to LEARN, we have won the battle.

Students' motivation, once they enter university, is taken for granted. Some show genuine interest in English, others study it just because they have to take the exams. With time, however, this conscious focus on the language gives way to specializations and gradually the language becomes the means to study linguistics, literature, or culture, rather than an end in itself. Nothing would have been more desirable were it not for two things. Firstly, we, teacgers, still have 10, and in senior years, 6 hours of Practical English to fill up, and secondly, students complain about forgetting the language rather than improving it. Isn't it then our basic task to boost the fading motivation, to spur interest and effort? One might say that in both these cases of working with young learners and university students teachers should attempt to make learning English a fascinating challenge and a special treat.

MATERIALS

varied

There are very few course books for children available in Poland The one which is most commonly used was written in 1964 and is totally fossilized. Thus teachers are bound to organize, create, improvise and use anything that is available. Besides being a sheer physical necessity, supplementary materials are also a pedagogical must. Even the best course book becomes too familiar, too monotonous. Children simply outgrow it. They tire easily of "sameness", they crave for an element of surprise, for the luxury of choosing and changing.

Every attempt to provide systematic, regular instruction using a course book has proved a failure with university students. On the one hand, the task of plodding through one book is too tedious, on the other hand, with the flood of EFL materials coming out practically every day, we cannot limit ourselves, and our students, to a single course, which quickly becomes outdated. Besides, this variety of mddia, texts, ideas results in the fact that we, teachers, rarely repeat our own lessons, being constantly lured into trying to use something new, and finding it very difficult to work along any but a very

general, sketchy syllabus.

There is another similarity in the use of materials. Once a book has been read and understood, the children lose interest and you cannot hope to do any more work with the text. At least not immediately. And if you ever do, you have to find another task, another purpose. While working with students we often feel responsible for studying materials thoroughly. But once the vocabulary has been learned, the content and the mechanics of the text analysed, when it comes to discussing the idea, there is nothing left to say! How often have we spoiled the best simulations or role plays in this way! If we want to save our most attractive materials for longer use, we should not reveal them to our learners. Let them always wonder what is on the next page.

authentic

I have hinted at the need of not only variety but also authenticity of materials. One may argue that children are too young for authenticity. But if they are able to read badges and T-shirt inscriptions, follow computer instructions and solve puzzles, they can, and they do, appreciate children's literature, and not only simplified readers.

Similarly, students prefer to read ads in real newspapers and fill in authentic driving licence forms rather than study the same texts in course books. The encounter with reality is much more motivating for all learners.

how difficult?

In deciding about the difficulty of materials one should aim at tasks slightly above the learners' level. Both groups enjoy challenging materials and reject with contempt too simple texts; and although students, unlike children, will not refuse point blank to work if they don't like the activity, all learners will lose interest if they find the activity meaningless.

syllabus

Teaching kindergarten children can only be done around some situational and thematical concepts.

Having tried different approaches and syllabuses, I and my colleagues have found that the most successful syllabus for the first and second year university students is also topic oriented. Thus with both groups I cover such topics as: family, shopping, food, sport, clothes, etc. But it is not only in titles where the similarity lies. I occasionally use the same, mostly visual, materials, such as Cue

Cards, picture stories, ideas for Bingo games, vocabulary tests, rhymes, Jazz Chants.

VARIETY

attention span

Attention span for children is very short: from 5 to 10 mins. Thus, in planning the lesson the teacher should aim at several short blocks, changing the pace and focus of the lesson.

If we observe our students carefully, or ourselves, for that matter, we notice that periods of high, intensive concentration seldom exceed 15 mins. We perhaps do not need tricks to relax our students /though to have a couple of fillers up one's sleeve is very useful/, but what we most certainly need is a variety of tasks and activities.

purpose

Even though the children need changing "props", variety does not mean chaos. On the contrary, young learners have a very strong sense of order and purpose. They have to know exactly WHAT they are going to do, what exercise books to use, what pens to draw with, etc. They are very particular about everything: time, colours, size of drawings, rules of the games ... . These demands require immense discipline and consistency on the part of the teacher in planning the lessons, checking homework, marking, keeping promises. If the teacher does not meet these requirements he will lose respect and control over the group.

The need for consistency and clarity in setting goals and requirements is equally strong among students. English IS a foreign language to them and they expect to be helped through its maze. Besides, freshmen are also learning to cope with university life, so different from that in secondary school. They feel strained and insecure, knowing that if they fail their exams, they will inevitably drop out. No wonder they expect some guidance in order to overcome the sense of futility and helplessness they feel while trying to grasp everything at once.

sense of achievement

Variety is essential also for other reasons - to give each learner a chance to perform well.

Which of us does not know the type of a passive, average-ability learner who is easily written off as a failure both by teachers and peers, until, by sheer chance, she/he reveals herself as a wonderful actor, gifted translator, or a sensitive poet. Children provide a very acute observing ground and such cases are very apparent among them. In my class I have children who hardly say a word but are able to memorize long lyrics and love singing, and children whose spelling is atrocious but who are unbeatable at telling stories. The most drastic case I have ever had was that of a girl who was treated with open contempt by her peers. Nobody wanted to sit next to her, to work or play with her. This situation continued until the moment we put up a play, in which she revealed her talents as the most wonderful actress, saying her lines fluently and with ease for the first time!

The necessity for diversified tasks at the university level is best seen at the examination which should objeczively and thoroughly assess stuaents' proficiency or progress. Realizing that students perform differently at different tasks we offer them quite a wide choice of tasks, topics and activities /also at the oral exam/, enabling each learner to do well in one or the other.

The sense of achievement and success is essential to build self confidence in the learner, regardless of his/her age. It is also indispensable for successful group relations and mutual respect. Without these positive emotions no work is possible, and no progress can be achieved.

GAMES

What games are for children /fun and enjoyment, they stimulate imagination and memory, provide opportunity for practice and revision/, role-plays and communicative activities are for students. The majority of them have never been to England and don't have any practce in "normal" linguistic interaction. Asking, denying, refusing, apologizing, etc. - these functions are almost foreign to them. This is because of the distancebetween teachers and learners in Poland, and a lack of interaction in English among the fellow students. Thus it is only playing games, or pretending in general that triggers off communication and provides opportunity for developing linguistic habits. Just like the child I have described, many students can express themselves only as fictional characters.

Preoccupied with correctness and accuracy students often become inhibited and hampered in their performance. Hence the need for any form of work which aims primarily at communication rather than perfection. When no longer threatened by having to face the whole group, students enjoy pair work very much. They become talkative, full of initiative, self-confident. They no longer feel manipulated by the teacher or oth r domineering colleagues, they feel themselves responsible for the lesson.

Games have also a structural role to play - they provide a frame, a skeleton which holds the lesson together providing transition, relaxation, reinforcement, practce. For students, if played at the end of the class, games additionally constitute a pleasant moment, something to remember, to take back home. After all, it is so much nicer to leave the classroom with the feeling of excitement and satisfaction than relief from utter boredom and grudgery.

David Cobb, in his article "How to play it both ways" /MFL Gazette, March '83/ said that the MFL course for children may be like a cork in a champagne bottle. I would like to refer this simile to using games in teaching. With children, games may shoot the cork out, if not selected cerefully and not organized properly, l aving uncontrollable disorder and chaos. Students, however, are different - they are like a bubbless sour drink that needs to be shaken up a bit. Games might show them that there is a lot of fun in the work they have to do.

SOUND

Children love to speak, to manipulate the sounds and this game of playing with language can be carried on in English as well. If encouraged and provided the means, they will happily recite nursery rhymes, repeat endlessly counting verses, sing songs, not necessarily knowing what they are saying, not even bothering to learn. This parroting is free from fear of making mistakes and a source of real pleasure. It does not have to be limited to the old repertoire, but may include Jazz Chants /which are immensly enjoyed by all my learners/, ballads, poetry.

I am afraid our students have lost the sheer enjoyment of sounds; and poetry, or at least play reading, has no tradition in Poland. I am trying to restore it.

mother tongue

I have been worrying thyt children so easily lapse into Polish /or never fully switch into English/ during the lessons. Yet they cannot help talking and if they want to tell me that e.g. their parrot has laid six eggs, they get so excited that I cannot expect them to say that in English! So instead of reprimanding them all the time I decided to allow them some chat in Polish during other activities e.g. drawing,making it clear that there are activities when only English is spoken.

One would expect and take for granted that because of their awareness, motivation and abilities to do so, students would use English all the time. Unfortunately, the moment they are out of the teacher's hearing, they immediately switch into Polish. Following the children's example I realized that they should also be given some periods of relaxation and security that the mother tongue provides, as long as the outcome of their work is rendered in English.

TEACHER - LESSON LEARNT

roles

Contact with children has given another dimension to my work and my role as a teacher. I had to make myself available to children: to jump and crawl, to be a monkey or a bee, to sit on the floor, play hide and seek, to sing and draw, in other words, to step down to their level and size. I had to become easily accessible to the children's touches, caresses, fears, tears and worries. I was to teach the children, but also to look after and to protect them, and on top of this - to amuse.

By having to fulfil all these roles I think I have become more reh relaxed with the students, forgetting about my own anxieties of being watched, controlled, and focussing on their needs. After all, dressing up as a Mickey Mouse for Halloween does not differ much from doing a role play, does it? And that is what I have been doing for the last few years. I do not only rearrange seats, sit in a circle, participate in group work, substitute for missing partners; I also, and this is the most difficult, write together with the students ands share my products with them. Students respond to my efforts very positively /I have direct feedback as well as comments from questionnaires/. They see and appreciate my contribution, are stimulated by

my high expectations and requirements, and realize that the success of our lessons and learning is our mutual responsibility.

timing

The need to time the activities is another lesson I learnt from working with children First it was their physiological clocks switching on and off, constantly demanding variety, then their enjoyment to compete in timed activities, finally, the necessity to cut some favourite games short, in full swing, if I wanted to use them again.

Setting the time increases alertness and efficiency of both teachers and learners. It gives a sense of order, achievement and, in the case of students, prepares them for taking timed examinations.

awareness

Children develop by "leaps": often for months they are quiet, unresponsive, so that you don't even know if they hear you; then they begin to speak and the accumulated knowledge errupts turning them into bloomers. Having observed this I have become more sensitive and patient waiting for the slow students to find their own way of self-expression, believing that they all have some. Yet, I must admit, occasionally this may prove very trying. After all, it is only too natural for every teacher to have her/his favourites: bright, quick learners, working with whom is more rewarding and satisfactory.

evaluation

Children are the best judges because they are spontaneous and honest. They will not suppress yawning trying to survive till the end of a boring lecture. They will openly demonstrate dissatisfaction by being restless, loud, even aggressive, opting out of the game or leaving the room altogether!.In other words - they will make the teacher aware of her/his inability or poor preparation. If children are bored, teachers are to blame.

Students seldom, if ever, assess teachers. Thus we feel immune, beyond any criticism, in our posts of university lecturers, gradually losing the ability of objective self-evaluation. Contact with children, who are not afraid to say that "the emperor has no clothes on", teaches us to always wear them: to be prepared.

Careful observation of children whose spontaneity openly registers all moods will also make us more aware of the fact that we all need

to be handled with care. We, teachers have little opportunity to re-experience what it means and how it feels to be students again: constantly challenged, controlled, marked, assessed. Children's responses and reactions will remind us how vulnerable we all are.

CONCLUSION

I have learnt from working with children to be more sensitive as a person and more daring, yet consistent and hard working, as a teacher.

How do my students benefit from this experience? Well, first of all they get, I hope, a better teacher. Secondly I try to help them regain their lost innocence and spontaneity, to put some life and enjoyment into their work as students now, and as teachers, in the future.

I have been teaching university students of English at the Institute of English Studies, Warsaw University, for 12 years. I have been active in materials, tests and syllabus designing, and have published in Polish pedagogical journals.

I also have a 6-year-experience in working with young beginners /5-11/ taking groups of children from kindergarten through their first years of primary school in English instruction. I have done some teacher training sessions in teaching young learners and presented a paper on The Role of Parents in Teaching Children /May, 1986 - Poland/.